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SUBJECT: SLOVENIA'S EU COMMISSIONER -- INTEGRATION,
COOPERATION KEY TO SUCCESS

Classified By: COM Thomas B. Robertson

¶1. (C) Summary. Slovenia's EU Commissioner, Janez Potocnik, is one of the country's brightest stars working outside its borders. When his tenure as Commissioner for Science and Research concludes in 2009, we can expect to see him re-emerge on the Slovenian political stage. In his role as Commissioner, Potocnik has been frustrated by the tendency of EU members to work as 27 rather than one. Opening up resources for use by and with third countries on scientific research and cooperation is a priority, and, in the tradition of all good Slovenian politicians, he has made an extra effort to engage the Western Balkans. A committed liberal democrat, Potocnik had criticism for the leadership and slow demise of his Liberal Democracy (LDS) party in Slovenia. Of the GOS's EU presidency, Potocnik predicted it would manage things capably if it set itself a minimum number of achievable goals, including EU enlargement, and relied on the Commission for guidance and assistance when it found itself out of its depth. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) COM hosted EU Commission Janez Potocnik for lunch April 6. Potocnik, an economist by trade, headed Slovenia's negotiating team for accession to the European Union and was Minister for European Affairs until 2004. He was nominated for his position in 2004 just months before parliamentary elections, by the previous government. Given his strong liberal democratic credentials, and the center-right government currently in power, he has no expectation of holding on to this position beyond this term. Potocnik expressed great enthusiasm for his job as Commissioner for Science and Research, saying it was more important to know how to manage resources and understand which way political winds were blowing to do a good job than to be well versed in scientific theories and jargon. Peer review would ensure good ideas were supported, not the heavy hand of the Commission.

Expanding Scientific Cooperation

¶3. (C) Potocnik was very pleased that the Seventh Research and Development Framework Program (FP7) dramatically increased the opportunities to use Commission funds for joint projects and programs with third countries including the U.S. and other non-EU members. He said the FP7 represented a major shift of philosophy on scientific cooperation in the EU, and he has devoted significant time and energy urging non-EU members to participate. Recognizing the financial commitment could be high for a developing economy, Potocnik developed a

scheme of discounts, and for some it is as high as 80% in the first year. This will be reduced over time, but the goal is to draw in all the prospective EU members now. He was, however, pessimistic that much could be done with Albania, which he termed "lost in space" scientifically, or Bosnia and Herzegovina, which he said was "wrecked" on the scientific front. Nevertheless, he was prepared to engage if either country demonstrated a keen interest.

Changing Face of the Left in Slovenia

¶14. (C) Turning to more domestic issues, COM asked Potocnik to comment on the disintegration of his party (LDS) and whether he had political ambitions himself. Potocnik said that LDS was not on the right track. As a committed liberal democrat, he was skeptical that the recent defection of some top LDS members to the Social Democrats (SD) was anything more than a calculated move to maintain political influence. The problem for LDS in his view, is that it lacks a strong leader, something Potocnik thought was almost part of the liberal democratic philosophy. As for his political future, Potocnik thought that another group of ex-LDS parliamentarians known as ZARES, led by former Economy Minister Matej Lahovnik, had possibilities. He had been in touch with them, and was curious to see how and if they could develop their movement into a new, truly liberal, political party.

EU Presidency - Keep it Simple

¶15. (C) Commenting on Slovenia's ability to put in a credible performance as EU President, Potocnik believed it could be done. The GOS would need to remain focused on a few key issues and not start with "crazy new ideas." COM asked for Potocnik's views on expansion, particularly into the Western Balkans. Potocnik thought Slovenia would be a credible advocate for EU expansion. In fact, he saw it as an imperative, citing the gap that has already developed between Slovenia and the other former Yugoslav republics in the three years since Slovenia joined the EU. Increasing this social and economic imbalance would be a disaster for the region. Potocnik further commented that the EU could not manage the Western Balkans by merely offering Stabilization Association Agreements. It needs "to do something special." The reticence of individual member states to engage energetically in the region is why, according to Potocnik, the Commission actively supports the concept of enlargement - in order to control it. If left in the hands of the member states, it would "explode."

Croatia - Continuing Irritation

¶16. (C) Despite the imperative for the EU to expand, Potocnik acknowledged the friction that exists between Slovenia and Croatia. He described the current posturing by some members of the GOS as similar to the way Austria bullied Slovenia over various issues during its accession process. While he views it as unfortunate that FM Rupel seems to have made it personal, he also suggested that the leadership in Croatia needed to appreciate that Slovenia was a serious country and not prone to impetuous changes of mind. He said there was unnecessary pride on both sides, and it was regrettable that Croatia could not accept publicly the support Slovenia does offer vis a vis the EU.

¶17. (C) Comment: Janez Potocnik remains among Slovenia's most popular politicians, despite the fact he has spent the majority of the last two and a half years outside the country. He is youthful, energetic and forward looking, and very likely, represents the future of Slovenian politics. After 50 years cocooned inside Yugoslavia and another 15 focused on building itself up as an independent country,

Slovenia must lower its cultural and economic barriers in order to flourish in Europe. Potocnik's years in Brussels will significantly enhance his credibility as a politician when he returns to Slovenia, as he is bound to do, in 2009. We expect to see him in a leadership role in the future. End Comment.

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